

# Keeping it simple and making progress

**Caroline Hattersley** of the National Autistic Society offers some guidelines for teaching and supporting children with autism.

## Educating children with autism

It is important to realise that each child with autism is different and therefore may respond in his or her own way to different types of education. Nevertheless, the common problems affecting social interaction, communication and imagination, and the repetitive behaviour, are common to all and therefore must be taken into consideration when teaching children with autism.

It is crucial to use simple language when talking to the child, speaking slowly and clearly. For example, rather than saying 'Tommy, put your coat on. It's time to go home!', saying 'Tommy, coat' may be more effective. Point to the coat at the same time and use the child's name. For children with better comprehension, speak in sentences, but ensure that they are short and simple, not ambiguous, and conveying one message at a time. Stress keywords if necessary and try to put them at the end of the sentence – 'It is time for a drink', for example.



## ABOUT AUTISM

Autism is a lifelong disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them. Children with autism have difficulty relating to others in a meaningful way. Their ability to develop friendships is generally limited, as is their capacity to understand other people's emotional expressions. Some children, but not all, have accompanying learning disabilities. All children with autism have impairments in social interaction, social communication and imagination. This is known as the 'triad of impairments'.

Some children may be diagnosed as having Asperger syndrome or high-functioning autism. Children with Asperger syndrome have fewer problems with language than those with autism, often speaking fluently, though their words can sometimes sound formal or stilted. People with Asperger syndrome do not usually have the accompanying learning disabilities associated with autism; in fact, children with Asperger syndrome are often of average or above average intelligence. Many will enter mainstream school and, with the right support and encouragement, can make good progress and go on to further education and employment.

Another technique is to use symbols, pictures or real objects. If you are telling a child it's time for a drink, show him or her a picture of a drink. Such techniques will also help reduce the frustration a child feels at not being able to communicate verbally. For very young children the real object may be better, possibly backed up with a symbol. You need to be careful with pictures because the child could 'home' in on the background if the picture has too much detail. Also, if not exactly the

same drink – say the picture is of milk and you are offering blackcurrant juice – he may not recognise it is still a drink, seeing it as something different.

Continually check that the child is listening and understanding. Many children may not look at you or the object but may still be taking everything in. Don't be afraid of repeating what you have said if you don't think the child has understood the first time. It is essential to give the young child a much longer time to



process the information than you would expect for other children. Also, if you repeat the instruction, repeat it in exactly the same way. If you say the phrase slightly differently the child may have to process the information all over again. This is particularly important if the child is in a group. Young children may not understand that they are included, so you may need to address them by name or talk to them alone, then to the group.

Always address a child by their name first. Don't assume if you say 'John' to a child they will automatically respond or, if the tone of voice implies 'stop that' or 'come here' that they will comply. Give positive instruction – i.e. what you want them to do rather than what you don't want them to do, so 'Sahid, sit down' rather than 'Sahid, stop running'.

### Lunch and break times

Lunch and break times can be particularly difficult for children with autism at nursery or school. Some are very sensitive to certain textures or flavours, or are frightened of trying new foods. Many are overactive and find it hard to sit down and eat at a table. It is therefore important to take things in small steps and praise the child for their progress. They may find eating as part of a group overwhelming – sitting the child at their own table



swallowed, and not before. If the child leaves food on their plate, just remove their plate without comment. Don't make a big fuss about what is left. Also accept that it may be better for a child to initially use his fingers, rather than a spoon or fork, if you just want him to eat: teach one skill at a time.

### Obsessions

Many children will have one or more obsessions, whether it be Thomas the Tank Engine or dinosaurs. A child may talk repeatedly about the subject, and it may be necessary to have rules such as he can only bring one engine to

activity together with something they do not enjoy. Gradually build up to two desired activities. Alternatively, they may always choose the same activity, such as playing with the toy train. A picture timetable can be used, alternating the train play with other activities.

### Health and safety

Some children do not seem to react to pain. They may not cry when hurt and show little or no awareness of danger. It is therefore advised that they are carefully monitored when using play equipment.

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and gradually introducing other children may help.

Lunch-time must be a very consistent routine with, perhaps, a personal table mat so that the child knows that it is time to sit down and eat. Encourage the child only to eat when sitting. Keep returning him to his chair to sit for a few minutes to eat. Be very clear what you are working on (favourite foods for example) so that the child wants to sit down and eat.

Gradually build up the amount and variety of food presented to the child. During the early days, only present the foods that the child knows and likes. Then put one small new item in middle of a favourite food (one pea in a jacket potato say) and gradually build up. If he shows interest in other foods, by all means then try the new food, unless the child is on a special diet. Give praise once the food has been

nursery or school (or none if you have a rule about not bringing toys to nursery) and that he can only talk about Thomas at certain times. A visual timetable can be used to implement this.

However, a child's special interest can be used as a tool. For example, Thomas and the other engines can be used to teach numbers and colours.

### Choice of activity

The emphasis on student choice of activity in Montessori teaching is something that children with autism may find difficult as they may struggle to make a choice about what to do. They may stand on the perimeter engaging in self-stimulatory activity, such as flicking their fingers. The best way to deal with this is to slowly build up the choices that are available to the child – initially offer them a favourite

They may also lack awareness of other children's safety in such actions as pushing another child aside. This is not to intentionally hurt the child, rather they are unaware that the other child may get hurt or be angry at being pushed aside.

### Training

With Montessori, as with all forms of teaching, it's important that nurseries and schools try to arrange training for all staff. For a list of day courses contact the NAS Information Centre on 020 7903 3599. To arrange in-house training and consultancy, contact the NAS Training Department on 0115 911 3363.

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